

Discourse and Communication for Sustainable Education,
vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 146–161, 2019

Spirituality and Sustainability of Interreligious/Interdenominational Dialogue in Theological Study Programs

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Abstract

This article is part of broader research on “The Interrelationship of Theology and Praxis in the Context of Sustainable Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue”¹ in which we explore two essential concepts: sustainability and interreligious dialogue. We have narrowed this broader topic to study how facilitation of students’ spirituality in theology study programmes develops an environment for sustainability of interdenominational/interreligious dialogue. We provide a theoretical glimpse into research from theology, pedagogy, and spirituality. Our future research process will be based on our findings. One of the current challenges is globalization, which coincides with diversification of cultural norms and moral values. The sustainability provision for our home – Earth – suggests new ways to achieve common solutions, not only economically (prosperity) and politically (peace and stability), but also religiously (justice and solidarity) in terms of current changes. But, looking deeper, theology is searching for new definitions for traditional concepts such as “my neighbour”, “creation”, and “community of believers”. *Bert Roebben states that* the Christian community (and the global community as a whole) needs to find means to “grow in a common humanity” (Roebben, 2018). In this article, we reflect on how a spiritual approach can be methodologically integrated into theology studies to promote spiritual growth and establish sustainable interreligious dialogue: What type of theology should create the foundation of theology study programmes to promote students’ spirituality as a prerequisite for sustainability? How does spirituality promote sustainability of interdenominational/interreligious dialogue? Research methodology combines hermeneutic insights on conditions for sustainability of interdenominational/interreligious dialogue, its theological foundations, spiritual practice as a pedagogical basis, and the possibility for implementing sustainable dialogue support mechanisms in theology study programmes. Theology study programmes that promote student spirituality develop an environment for sustainable interdenominational/interreligious dialogue.

Keywords: spirituality, interdenominational/interreligious dialogue, sustainability, theological education, humanness.

Dialogue

Interreligious dialogue is considered part of inter-civilization dialogue (Swidler, 2015, p. 3). Huntington gained wider recognition with his ideas about the *clash of civilizations*, which highlights irreconcilable contradictions between cultures in terms of values, religions, and lifestyles. In contrast to Huntington's *clash* theory, there are efforts, including academic ones, to offer a *dialogue* of civilization theory. Therefore, the strength and possibly also a weakness of this study lies in justification of the prerequisites for interreligious dialogue, sustainability, and possibilities for theological education to advance this theory.

Dialogue, while not a new form of communication, has gained great public significance. *Dialogue* (from the Greek) means "thinking together". We know Socratic dialogue to be a joint/ shared epistemological practice, but this experience does not help us reflect on dialogue as a form of collective communication to reach common goals for transformation of public life.

Modern communication theories discuss various communication models. The transaction model of communication differs from other communication models in that it incorporates conceptualization of communication, the roles of information transmitters and receivers that are simultaneously implemented by all communication participants and the role of context (Barnlund, 1970). Transaction communication describes communication as a process in which members of the conversation simultaneously create a social reality in a specific social, relational, and cultural context. In this model, we exchange not only messages, but we also communicate in order to build relationships, intercultural alliances, perceptions about ourselves, and we engage in dialogue to establish a community.

Intercultural dialogue is based on two important attitudes held by those involved in communication – *desire to engage in conversation* and *mutual respect*. The aim is to resolve conflict between different cultural assumptions by reaching a new, common content in line with common understanding of those involved in the conversation. Dialogue does not include use of power positions while constructing social reality. In simple terms, dialogue is a conversation on a common topic among people with varying viewpoints whose primary goal is to *learn from each other* in order to change and grow simultaneously. In pedagogical terms, dialogue applies the "I can learn" instead of "I can teach" attitude (Swidler, 2015, p. 6).

Since the 20th century, in the context of religion, *dialogue* is better understood and used more in opposition to "debates". In the past, monologue, not dialogue, was applied. We usually talked to those who thought the same, or those who *should* think the same, as we do. We were convinced that the truth was only on our side. And with *them*, we had one-way communication – a monologue. Because of the *absolute truth issue*, religious dialogue became an even more complicated concept than in any other sphere. We do not claim to be omniscient in the humanities or natural and social sciences, for no one can know everything about everything. Yet, religion purports to know the absolute truth about understanding the meaning of life and our final objectives. If we do not want dialogue to become a battlefield on faith issues, critical thinking becomes a necessary prerequisite for dialogue. As Swidler states, "Dialogue and critical thinking are two sides of the coin of humanity." (2015, p. 7) Humanness is dialogical in its nature: dialogue between body and spirit, woman and man, individual and collective. Moreover, dialogue becomes a prerequisite for global sustainability, because previously-used mono-

logic, aggressive, and arrogant forms of communication have led us to a global eco-crisis that encompasses everything created by God.

Intercultural (interreligious – L.G.) *dialogue is a special type of hermeneutics where thinkers give other worldviews space within themselves, letting other views resonate within their own horizon of understanding. Intercultural thinkers – such as Panikkar, Nishida, Izutsu, Borges, Corbin, and Shayegan – let themselves consciously become an arena in which different forms of existential cultural values are given voice and play out their role, thereby leading to new creative polyphonic expressions of spirit.* (Afterthought – The problem of the many, 2014).

What is the relationship between the two – dialogue and sustainability? We will address this question in the following section.

Sustainability Defined

The Western world is no longer able to avoid the consequences resulting from the activities of the “First World”, such as acid rain, the activities of the “Second World”, such as the nuclear disaster in Chernobyl, or the activities of the “Third World”, such as massive cutting of Amazon rainforests. Roman Catholic scholar Leonard Swidler calls this phenomenon a *consciousness of the 21st century*. It is global in comparison to *mythical* and *individualistic* consciousness, which historically replaced each other. It is global in two senses: 1) horizontally, as culture and religion meet each other globally, joining a creative dialogical process that may lead to a complex collective consciousness and 2) vertically, rooted deeply in the earth becoming a stable and safe foundation for further development (Swidler, 2015, p. 15). The Earth is referred to both in its direct and indirect meanings and linked to the concept of sustainability.

In simple terms, sustainability requires coordination of the needs of the planet’s modern inhabitants with the needs of the planet’s future population, without removing the possibility of fulfilling these needs in the future or without compromising this opportunity. Sustainability implies reference to the goal: achieve harmonious development in three essential aspects – biological/environmental, social, and economic. Thus, sustainability of dialogue is defined by how interaction between these three aspects takes place, how fair and dialogical the social environment will be, and whether it will create conditions for formation of community. In the context of theological education and inter-religious dialogue, the latter is most important and relates to sustainability goals defined by the United Nations:

- reduction of poverty (provision of social support systems);
- elimination of hunger (development of *wise* agriculture);
- quality of education (provision of basic skills for all, supply of professional teachers, school buildings and access to energy resources, Internet access);
- gender equality (equal opportunities in education, health care, the labour market, and political-economic decision-making processes);
- reduction of inequality (including all disadvantaged and marginalized groups);
- sustainable communities and cities (equal opportunities);
- peace, justice and powerful institutions; and
- global partnership (Sustainable Development Goals, UN).

Sustainable social objectives include decolonization and availability of information, for example, availability of Internet and ICT globally. Social objectives are emphasized as most important by some researchers (Cernea, 1994). American researcher of University of California, Sharachchandra M. Lele recommends distinguishing trivial conceptualisations of sustainable development from meaningful ones. (Lele, 1991, p. 608) Meaningful interpretations are multi-dimensional, often with various social (justice, participation, equality, empowerment, institutional sustainability, cultural integration) and economic (growing economy, efficiency, material well-being) targets. In such situations, the integrity of ecosystems is necessary as a basis for productive activity that influences society and the economy. In this case, *dialogue* would be an instrument for ensuring the integrity of the ecosystem. The concept of sustainability is meaningful not just because it offers a comprehensive solution to the various meanings of what is good, but because it is a way of incorporating these differences into common discussions and potential agreements, which then become the basis for collective activity. When perceiving sustainable development as a dialogue of values, one must also be aware that a consensus of values will never be reached just by developing a common agenda for a collective activity of different social groups and actors. This must include mutual respect (Ratner, 2004, pp. 50–69).

What kind of partner would religious traditions be in a dialogue between implementing sustainability and integrity of ecosystems? How sound would their voices be? What could the theological contribution of Christianity to this discussion be?

First, if we consider the integrity of the global ecosystem, from a religious point of view we must mention interreligious dialogue and the inner dialogue of each individual religious tradition. religious Pluralism is part of the ecosystem. Pluralism and its greatest benefit – diversity in the centre – is not an end in itself. Its ethical contribution is dialogue and the experience of dialogue. In this case, Mutuality theology can be mentioned. In his article “*Religious Pluralism and Religious Imagination: Can a Pluralistic Theology Sustain Christian Faith*”, Paul F. Knitter describes possibilities for interreligious dialogue from a Christian perspective, discussing Pluralist Christology, which is Dialogical Christology in its essence:

A Christology of Mutuality – that is an understanding and following of Jesus that requires an encounter with others, that is in need of relationship and conversation with those who are walking on other religious paths. Perhaps the most fundamental reason is this: if a Sacramental Christology recognizes not only the possibility but the probability, even necessity, of other symbols or sacraments of the Divine throughout history, it will also feel the necessity of learning about and from those other sacraments (Knitter, 2002).

Secondly, the change in theologically thinking from anthropocentric to bio-centric, as Lynn T. White Jr. noted in 1967, speaks of the impact of anthropocentric Christian views on the processes that have led to the ecological crisis (Grønvold, 2013). Over the past 50 years, various religious traditions and research by Christian theologians have pointed to an increase in attention towards the relationship between nature, humans, and God in studies of religion and ethics. One of the essential ethical ideas is that environmental problems are closely related or even lead to social problems, and (non)realization of human needs relates to the needs of ecosystems (O’Brien, Bohannon & Bauman, 2011, p. 93). Eco-justice was introduced as a concept in the 1970s.

Spiritual causes for climate change are mentioned both by Bartholomew, patriarch of the Orthodox tradition (Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, 2005, p. 67), and Pope Francis, Head of the Roman Catholic Church (*Laudato Si*, 2015), in their addresses to Christian communities and the world. But in his address, Olav Fykse Tveit, Secretary General of the World Church Council, asked: “So the question arises – whose *oikos* is it anyway?” (Tveit, 2017)

Louk A. Andrianos’ study “*Ecumenical Theology of Hope for the Common Oikos and the Greed Line as Principle of Sustainability*”, conducted under the umbrella of the World Council of Churches, is devoted to this issue. His study describes *oikos*: the Greek word *oikos*, whose roots are the English prefix *eco*, and *its* three separate concepts – family, family property, and the house in which the *oikos* family lives. In ancient Greece, *oikos* was a basic cell of society. In general, all Greece was composed of *oikoi*. In turn, *oikoi* from all lands together formed the world, the earth as a whole. Thus, ecumenical *oikos* theology includes three dimensions: the existential dimension as a single family of all living things; the physical dimension as the physical world or earth as home for all; and the management dimension as stewardship of all humanity. The unified family is theocentric because all creation – not just people, but active, still, visible, and invisible nature – forms the united family of God. Global stewardship (management) is anthropocentric in that humans’ sinful nature, which manifested through self-centeredness and greed, has created injustice and suffering for all God’s family. Redemption of mankind from self-centeredness and greed is its great hope. It involves taking responsibility and caring for this family. The ultimate goal of sustainability is not simply prosperity but to principally implement (share) the peace within *oikos*. Earth is a sacred place for all living things, because the Spirit of God maintains it. Therefore, it deserves respect and care so that future generations may also live in this dwelling (Andrianos, 2012, pp. 600–616).

In today’s complex economy where people often fail to recognize the structural connections between their desire to improve their living standards (status) and the poverty suffered by others, Christian churches and ecumenical organizations have the task of making visible – and lifting up the voices of – those people who are in the socio-economic margins. (Andrianos, 2012, p. 610).

The three pillars of unified *oikos* are unity, peace, and justice, and their prerequisites are love and active faith. The precondition of active faith implies a spiritual dimension, which shall be described in the next section.

Spirituality

Although spirituality is a concept that describes our era, and growing interest in this subject is the most prominent aspect of modern Western culture, it is often rejected in traditional religious communities (Shaldrake, 2013, xi). There is a belief that in modernity there is virtually no relationship between theology and spirituality, although in the history of Christian thought, such division can be translated as an anomaly. In early Christianity, true theology meant to share God’s wisdom and knowledge about the reality of “contemplation”. It encompassed and transformed a person by revealing the totality of human existence in front of God (McIntosh, 2005, pp. 392–394). In the light of *oikos*, this type of spirituality unites optimistic dreams and utopian visions, and works of love and active faith. Paulinian understanding of spirituality does not reveal

the contrast between the body and soul but between two different attitudes towards life. Therefore, a spiritual person is a person who lives by the Spirit of God, or, in other words, one who *has* the spirit of God (Shaldrake, 2013, p. 1).

During the formation of universities, Christian discourse moved from exegetic contemplation of biblical texts to rational arguments of logical approaches. This was an important milestone in the division between theology and spirituality. Developmental directions of late modernity, such as liberation and feminist theologies, created an important thought: personal transformation must not be separated from dialogical engagement with the truly liberating divine *Other*. This idea restores the interpretation of modern self-constitution in a light of relationships (relational), allowing the use of any theological understanding in anthropological conclusions (McIntosh, 2005, pp. 392–394). After the Second Vatican Council, changes in understanding of spirituality 1) implied previous distinctions between the supernatural (spiritual life) and the simply natural (everyday life); 2) restored the sense and understanding that “spiritual life” is collective by nature, rather than individual; 3) personal experience was not limited but integrated all aspects of the human experience; 4) refit into mainstream or leading theology, not just in biblical research; and 5) became a field of reflection that bridged the boundaries between various Christian traditions as an intermediary for ecumenical growth. At the end of the 20th century, the use of the spirituality expanded to a wide ecumenism within interreligious dialogue (Shaldrake, 2013, p. 2).

Nowadays, it is difficult to define “spirituality” as this term has many different meanings and in a variety of contexts, although modern literature on spirituality regularly includes some or all of the following approaches.

- 1) Spirituality focuses on what is holistic – it is a fully integrated approach to life. It is based on the fact that historically, the term “spiritual” is related to another concept – the Holy. It comes from the Old English word *hālig*, meaning “whole” or “complete”, and it is also associated with the ancient Greek word *holos*. In this sense, spirituality must be understood not only as an element of human existence, but also as an integrating factor of life attributable to life-as-a-whole.
- 2) In contemporary understanding, spirituality is related to the issue of holiness. In religious spirituality, for example Christian spirituality, “the holy” is closely related to belief in God, but in today’s popular culture it also refers to the numinous (sometimes found in nature or art), undefined depth of human existence, or the widest interpretation of the mystery of endless space.
- 3) Spirituality is sometimes understood as the search for meaning, including the search for the meaning of life or the sense of life’s direction. This association with sense and meaning often contributes to rejection of traditional religions and social authorities, particularly in Western cultures. Contemporary spirituality, due to its link to questions about meaning, internally offers understanding of human identity and personality development. For example, in education standards and programmes, spirituality is defined as *the development of human intangible elements that make us active and sustainable*. Spirituality is often associated with concepts of “growth” or “development”.
- 4) Definitions of modern spirituality are often related to questions of absolute values as opposed to instrumentalisation and purely materialistic ways of life.

- 5) Thus, spirituality implies not only a self-reflective life (instead of a non-assessed life), but also covers ethics and morality (Shaldrake, 2013, pp. 2–3).

Today it is also possible to speak of a phenomenon known as “secular spirituality”. The concept *secular* has not always been the opposite of *religious*. In Latin, *saeculum* simply means “this era” or “here and now”. In Roman Catholic tradition, secular means one who serves in the world and does not remain within the walls of the monastery. Today, however, secular spirituality is used outside religious context. Christian spirituality sometimes (remotely) enriches this type of spirituality: 1) there are a number of profession-related spiritualities in which people seek spiritual dimension in their work place, thus discovering the meaning that comes from increasing the common good (work as a spiritual activity); 2) a large emphasis on spirituality in terms of human well-being and growth (health care in spirituality); and 3) in increasing urbanization, urban thinkers and professionals look at possibilities of how spirituality can improve urban life (Shaldrake, 2013, p. 210). In this way, it is possible to include the non-religious perspective in interreligious dialogue and the *oikos* world. The development function is implemented through education by emphasizing mental activities and promoting the search for meaning, shared values, and the individual’s sense of holism.

How spiritual development can be used in theological study programs, thus supporting sustainability of interreligious dialogue will be discussed in the next section.

Theology Studies, Spirituality, and Dialogue

The Question of Methodology

When it comes to promoting spirituality in theology studies and in interreligious dialogue, attention should be paid to the methodology of the industry. Studies and research in spirituality can also be understood as a separate academic discipline versus Theology and Religious Studies (Schneiders, 2011, p. 15). In this case, theology remains as part of existing Christian theology, while religious studies are learning about religions from an external perspective. Research in spirituality, as a separate discipline but to a large extent also in dialogue with the insights of theology and religious studies, focuses on the task of promoting spirituality. We reflect on how the spirituality approach can be methodologically integrated in theology studies to promote spiritual growth and establish sustainable interreligious dialogue.

The first question is whether this is necessary at all. Undoubtedly, theology studies are facing great challenges. Society is changing, and the role of religion in society is also changing. The challenge of today’s world is that it is a pluralistic society – a meeting place of many different religious traditions. The nature of theology studies is changing with reference to this variable. World trends show that religious studies are increasingly finding their place in Faculties of Theology. Some of the leading European Faculties of Theology, such as Oxford University and KU Leuven, are now called the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, and research on religions is included in their study programs.² Similarly, the Faculties of Theology in Switzerland have also responded to the new challenges: at the University of Lausanne, the Faculty of Theology has become the Faculty of Theology and Sciences of Religions; at the University of Bern in 2010, the Faculty of Theology expanded their study options with programs in Religious Studies (Interreligiöse Studien); since 1999, the University of Zurich Faculty of Theology has also offered Religious Studies in addition to Theology (Studium religionswissenschaft)

and in 2015, the Faculty established a professorship in Spiritual Care (Professur für Spiritual care). This is important because it introduced a new interdisciplinary concept of spiritual care into the Faculty of Theology, taking into account the developments of this era. This is largely due to the decline of applications for theology studies. Our long-term experience in theological education allows us to observe that in Latvia too, increasingly fewer students choose to study theology to obtain a specific profession or to accept a post (such as pastor) in a specific religious organization.

In general, modern interest in the study of theology arises from the interest in religion as a phenomenon, or even more, from the desire to perfect one's own personality – to advance one's own spirituality. A similar observation can be seen in educational institutions tied to specific religious organizations: relatively few students intend to assume a specific position. The number of students in seminaries is relatively small across Europe. The time when theology studies were understood as leadership training for churches is gone, at least in its exclusive sense (Schleiermacher, 1830, pp. 243–446).³ Developing theology studies in a way that consciously integrates the promotion of spirituality would mean recognizing this reality and deliberately focusing on how theology studies could be shaped and transformed. That means intentionally serving the goal that is already there – responding to the spiritual quest.

It does not necessarily mean radical changes in theological study programmes. Rather, it is more a matter of attitude: realizing that it is not about normative, exclusive studies that serve only one tradition, but rather about the holistic questioning for meaning.

There are additional methodologies that should be emphasized. In terms of spirituality research, these are briefly summarized by spirituality researcher Celia Kourie in her article “Spirituality and the University” and include anthropological, theological, historical, hermeneutical, and phenomenological methods (Kourie, 2009, pp. 148–173). We will assess these methods as possible approaches for theology studies.

Anthropological methodology is foremost in spirituality studies. Spirituality does not begin in a particular religious or theological tradition, but from interest about humans as such: about the capability of spirituality, the ability to place oneself in a wider spiritual context. In this sense, no particular religion makes a person spiritual (for example, Christianity), but the individual has the ability to be spiritual in his or her own essence. Here, the task is to somehow exit the “frame of mind” in order to capture a more holistic view of the human spiritual experience by integrating scientific disciplines; for example, psychological, sociological, artistic, linguistic, and theological viewpoints, which also touch on human spirituality. In addition, various ideological perspectives – feminist, ecological, humanistic, pluralistic – and reflections on different religious traditions (Kourie, 2009, pp. 159–160) should be included.

From a critical perspective, one might ask whether such high levels of integration of many perspectives is possible and if more than a generalized overview can be achieved.

Those who have tried to apply an interdisciplinary approach to their research are aware of the effort required when crossing borders and expressing oneself in two scientific languages, each with its methodological and substantive complexity. Yet, religious and theology studies already have an extremely rich background, as they have historically included elements of many disciplines and continue to build a holistic viewpoint using methodologies and knowledge from various disciplines. This need not require intense integration of new disciplines, but rather development of an anthropological approach, e.g. awareness that human spirituality is not exclusively religious (for example, secular

spirituality). In particular, discussion could commence about increasing the proportion of subjects on interreligious dialogue (Kourie, 2009, p. 160).

Yet, an anthropological perspective or approach could result in rejection of the theological method, which has deep roots in Christian theology. The theological approach draws on fundamental truths of Christian traditions and is beneficial for modern researchers. Some insights have become dogmas, such as Christian understanding of God and Christology. From the very beginnings of the formation of Christian self-reflection and even from the era of Christian apologists, Christianity and its spirituality has been regarded as true, even exclusive (Ebeling, 1962, pp. 756–758). There is a hope linked to theology that it may point to “true” spirituality, against the others, and that the insights gained with this methodology may serve as the norm for developing spirituality in general (Kourie, 2009, p. 161). Yet, if spirituality has various definitions and is no longer exclusive to one religious tradition, the theological approach must give up the claim as the only truth. In other words, the theological method must help to obtain the enrichment of spirituality from traditions that have accumulated over many generations, but simultaneously take into account the wider perspective of spirituality. “The position of reciprocity and critical correlation between theology and spirituality is the preferred approach.” (Kourie, 2009, p. 162)

Tradition has already been mentioned. Only the historical method reminds us that spirituality has roots and has grown and developed within a specific tradition (Kourie, 2009, p. 163). Moreover, in academic research, historical perspective provides the opportunity to place certain forms of spirituality in historical context. History reveals that some forms of spirituality have been forgotten over time, but still enrich contemporary spirituality. History also makes possible the ability to reflect on what history has done to us. As religious paradigms change, it is important to reflect on how we have arrived at where we are now. History has shaped us, or as Gadamer reminds us, we are shaped by the history of effect (2004, pp. 299–306). In this case, it is about something which is more than just a method; it is about the consciousness that permeates the study process. The individual’s world of beliefs has developed as the result of specific traditions. This historical approach, or history of effect approach, is also essential for creating dialogue. It allows us to learn about traditions and their identities in various contexts. It also allows us to identify the interactions of traditions, the history of their relationships. Perhaps it even causes us to adopt certain perceptions, or fusions of perceptions; conversely, it may cause problematic aggression between different beliefs. Evaluation of historical narratives from various positions, which can be accomplished during academic studies, is a very important basis for interreligious dialogue in theology studies as well.

The hermeneutic method is not meant to be an application of a particular hermeneutic theory. It is about several steps of the hermeneutic process. Description of the particular phenomenon may relate to texts, historical facts, and political, sociological, and psychological elements (Kourie, 2009, p. 164). Critical analysis of this phenomenon must take place through theological and interdisciplinary analysis, which prepares the way for constructive interpretation. Clearly, this is cognitive and intellectual academic activity, but, as emphasized by researchers of spirituality, the idea that it is related to the “lived reality in the present” (Kourie, 2009, p. 164) is essential. The hermeneutic approach states that academic studies must be part of a holistic process on the way to spirituality, emphasizing that studies must also promote spirituality. Promoting spirituality in theology studies would mean retreating from purely academic tasks to reaching

a set objective; for example, in Catholic theology speaking about formation. But, this is not spirituality of just one tradition: these studies are suitable for the search of the modern person's spiritual awareness in all its forms.

The link to real life is also consistent in the phenomenological method, which is based on the internal examination of experience. It focuses on one's adventure and experience, which plays an extremely important role in academic studies and is a way to promote spirituality. This cannot happen without intentional and methodical inclusion of a person's experience in the study process. It is the most topical in the field of practical theology, which focuses on spiritual care; it is self-evident that this cannot happen without taking into account personality and experience. However, the phenomenological method calls for taking into account our experiences in all types of studies. Spirituality is an experience and when it comes to promoting spirituality, this cannot take place without methodological analysis of one's experience. The phenomenological approach requires taking into account the diversity of experience from the individual person's perspective. In this way, this approach can also provide a basis for dialogue in theology studies. We have to acknowledge, of course, that the phenomenological method of empathizing with the experience of other religious traditions, putting aside our own presuppositions, is not always able to achieve its goal. On the one hand, it is very difficult to empathize with the unknown, with what that is for others; on the other hand we do not know our own prejudices, and are not, therefore, able to lay them aside (Jackson, 2016, p. 152). But nevertheless this method offers a way of incorporating our experience into academic studies, while needing, of course, to be supplemented with perspectives gained from other methods.

Assessment of these different methodologies and approaches leads us to conclude that they are quite compatible with Christian theology, which already includes several of these elements in its sub-disciplines. As already stated, it is more about the awareness of how the academic work of theological disciplines is carried out in which spiritual perspectives permeate various theological disciplines, starting from historical theology and ending with the systematic definition of knowledge.

The Question of Practice

Our understanding of existence and reality determines our actions. Dialogue teaches us about *the Other*, which we can learn if we want to participate and treat it with respect and use critical thinking. In this context, intercultural dialogue, which includes interreligious aspects in a specific hermeneutical formation of *the Other*, is the first step towards mitigating the negative risks of conflicts between differing values.

In the academic context, we live within the paradigms of dominant theoretical beliefs, as defined by Thomas Kuhn, which have changed over history (Kuhn, 1970). Similar paradigm shifts can be attributed to the development of Christian theological thought, ranging from the paradigm of Jesus' Semitic thinking (storytelling, using metaphors, caring for "what to do") to Hellenistic thinking of early Christianity (abstract philosophies, caring for "what to think" in the context of many Creeds), and later Byzantine, Medieval, and further paradigm shifts in Western Christianity until a new epistemology of how we understand the world around us that determines what we believe is *true* or appropriate for our *reality*. This new epistemology determines how we perceive the world, how we think about it, and, accordingly, how we act. Until the turn of the

19th century, truth was static, absolute, and monological. It became de-absolutized, and has now become relational. Thus, changes in the perception of truth are related to the speaker or knower's fundamental understanding of reality and how it is passed on to other listeners, and receivers of information. The closest one can get to the essence of matters is by engaging in dialogue with others who perceive reality differently and by helping to enrich each other's understanding from a different perspective. Admittedly, this process is endless (Swidler, 2015, pp. 10–11). Even a century ago, every religion and ideology believed that it was self-sufficient in its explanation of the ultimate meaning of life and appropriate way of living. In the context of today's global challenges, religions and ideologies are becoming aware of their limitations (but not everywhere and not everyone), which leads to a "historical, pragmatic, knowledge, sociology, language analysis, hermeneutics, and dialogue epistemological revolution" (Swidler, 2015, p. 16) or a paradigm shift in thinking.

Evelyn Underhill (1955) suggests that humans are beings with imagination and the ability to be creative and not just some tool-producing animals. In other words, not only is physical or intellectual excellence important for people, but they also strive towards spiritual perfection.

In the context of theological education, the typology of spirituality developed by Shaldrake (2013) is helpful:

- Ascetic monastic spirituality – sometimes requires special places like a desert or a monastery. The path towards spiritual growth and moral perfection implies self-asceticism and abstention from worldly pleasures with the ultimate goal – a complete renunciation of material life as a precondition for eternal life.
- Mythical spirituality – the desire to experience an immediate presence of God through exercising contemplative practices. This does not always require the renunciation of daily routine, but it suggests that the daily routine can possibly be turned into something miraculous. Mythical spirituality is often associated with intuitive knowledge of God beyond discursive thinking and analysis. The ultimate goal is spiritual enlightenment and connectivity to the depth of existence.
- Active practical spirituality – contributes to everyday life in that it becomes the main context for spiritual development and search for authentication. This type of spirituality does not require departing from daily problems in order to attain spiritual truth or enlightenment. All that is needed for spiritual growth is to act following the words of Jesus: "The kingdom of God is among you." Since it emphasizes the search for God within daily existence, this kind of spirituality is accessible to everyone, not just to groups that are specifically dedicated to an ascetic life or involved in contemplative practices. This type of spirituality seeks to find spiritual growth through daily experiences, duties and activities, including serving the people.
- Prophetically critical spirituality – a simple and practical way of serving the people, with the aim to implement social changes and social justice. Such transformation is a mental task.

Research on spirituality particularly motivated us to link interreligious dialogue, spirituality, and sustainability in our research on theological education. We will comment on some pedagogical implications, but this topic deserves broader analysis, which is not within the scope of this article.

Spirituality and education, as the cultural heritage of Christian tradition, enrich various modern practices of spirituality and education. Certain religious or theological education activities combine these to facilitate learning to perceive, understand, and communicate about sacred places, texts, and rituals as important aspects of this cultural heritage. The purpose of such learning is to promote the spirituality or spiritual well-being of those who are involved, and people who belong to various religious and cultural traditions can engage in such learning activities. This means learning together, while practicing interreligious dialogue.

We attended trial learning activities in May 2018, thanks to an invitation from Bert Roebben (Roebben, 2018, pp. 9–22). Such learning experiences adhere to Shaldrake's typology and illustrate the development of *active practical* spirituality within educational activities.

Annual training seminars we have participated in with students over the past 15 years on Öland, Sweden have inspired us to develop ideas on how to integrate spirituality in these seminars. One of the activities (positively evaluated by many participants) was contemplation on the Lutheran Rosary or Life Pearls in an alvar on Öland (a sparse grassland site known as 'the desert' among students) where it was possible to implement both the *ascetic monastic* (limited time) and also *mythical spirituality* in the study process. But *prophetic Christian* spirituality is promoted through the use of diverse practices in theology studies.

Summarizing the above, it is possible to define competencies and criteria to measure progress and to outline the principles and steps for programmes and courses within the framework of innovative pedagogical processes. More time and alternative spaces are required, but this allows students *to do* the content instead of just *listen*.

Sustainability features of interreligious dialogue, which are the result of programmes and courses, can be used to create a pedagogical framework base for theological studies. The objective of such studies is the promotion of sustainability of interreligious dialogue. At the same time, the objective is to acquire and develop competencies related to the study programme:

- 1) development of values such as respect, justice, unity, peace, and understanding *the Other*;
- 2) expression of will – willingness to participate, to learn;
- 3) cognitive, social, theological skills – critical thinking, community, active faith (spirituality), imagination, and love; and
- 4) knowledge and understanding about interreligious dialogue, spirituality, and sustainability.

In two innovative approaches for development of study programmes – *Understanding by Design* (UbD) and *Idea-Based Learning* – concept skills and knowledge become “big ideas” around which pedagogical activity is structured: “A fundamental idea of UbD is that coming to a deep understanding requires rethinking key ideas, whether we are talking about young students or veteran teacher-designers.” (Wiggins, 2005, p. 254)

In the implementation of these approaches, the most important step is planning, as shown in Figure 1 (Wiggins, 2012, p. 1).

Stage 1— Desired Results	Stage 2— Assessment Evidence	Stage 3— Learning Plan
Module I: Unpacking Standards	Module J: Identifying Evaluative Criteria for Assessments	Module K: Refining the Learning Plan in Stage 3
Module L: Sharpening Essential Questions and Understandings	Module M: Authentic Assessment and Validity	Module N: Differentiating—Tailoring the Learning Plan to the Learners
Module O: Designing the Lesson Plan for Your Unit		
Module P: Obtaining and Using Feedback		

Figure 1. Outline of modules (Wiggins, 2012, p. 1)

The order of the steps can be in mixed. Competence becomes a standard, which is then revealed in following steps ordarbības activity modules. In brief, the “big ideas” (Hansen, 2011, 138–139) are as follows:

1. Each *big idea* includes several smaller, subsequent *ideas* that reveal the main content of the programme/course to ensure long-lasting understanding. Each of the sub-themes contains a defined *learning outcome*.
2. Learning outcomes determine *authentic performance tasks* for students,⁴ as they will determine how learning outcomes will be achieved. Planning of both takes place simultaneously.
3. Common *incorrect assumptions*⁵ by students about programme and course content determines next steps. This allows formulation of *essential questions* and *meaningful concepts*.
4. *Learning activities* are planned around *tasks of performance*, which demonstrate student comprehension about content and is related to *learning outcomes*.
5. The closing principle is to develop performance *assessment criteria* and to describe the final competence, thus allowing students to follow their learning process and to evaluate learning outcomes for students, lecturers, and the institution.

It is important to keep in mind that three different concepts are used here: studies (both teaching and learning), teaching (pedagogic activity), and learning (student student’s active involvement).

Conclusions

Dialogue is one of the most essential conditions for sustainability. It includes aspects of an individual’s will such as *desire to participate*, and *desire to learn*, and *critical thinking*, which simultaneously can be attributed to education.

The sustainability of interreligious dialogue is based in the experience of various Christian denominations and religious traditions accumulated throughout the centuries as dialogue with *the Other* and in a united *oikos*, as well as through implementation of spiritual practice, which allows integration of a secular spirituality.

As a result of our study, we define competence as the need for provision of sustainability of dialogue:

- 1) development of values such as respect, justice, unity, peace, and understanding of the *Other*, which creates students’ attitudes;

- 2) expression of will – willingness to participate and learn;
- 3) cognitive, social, theological skills – critical thinking, community, active faith (spirituality), imagination, love; and
- 4) knowledge and understanding about interreligious dialogue, spirituality, and sustainability.

Simultaneously, competency becomes a potential objective and learning outcome of theology studies. It is possible to achieve such results by employing innovative pedagogical approaches such as Understanding by Design (UbD) and Idea-Based Learning.

The direction of future research studies depends on development of a programme or course that adheres to these principles and testing through educational action research.

Note:

(1) The first three parts of this article are prepared by Laima Geikina with the support of ERDF Activity 1.1.1.2. “Post-doctoral Research Aid” research project “Interrelationship of Theology and Praxis in the Context of Sustainable Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue.” Project number: 1.1.1.2/VIAA/1/16/076/.

(2) KU Leuven Faculty of Theology changed its name in 2011. A short explanatory comment about this can be found on its home page: “Since its start in 1432, our faculty has always tried to anticipate the local and international context and to find a balance between academy, church and society. This is still the case today. In the last few decades, we have made room for other scientific approaches of religion, for getting to know other religions and religious movements, and for ecumenical and interreligious dialogue in our theological research and teaching. In doing so, we have been able to maintain and reinforce our role of pioneer in the theological landscape. This interdisciplinarity, which is essential for theology, is clearly appreciated.”

(3) In the 19th century, Friedrich Schleiermacher defined theology as a practical discipline that serves to prepare and form church leadership, without which church administration is not possible.

(4) The new content is applied in new or simulated contexts. *The content of big ideas* rotates around one or several significant *authentic tasks* and in implementing them, students encounter the same types of problems as do researchers. The task requires from students “doing” the content/subject using evaluative and innovative attitudes for demonstrating knowledge and skills acquired during the programme/course. Such a task can be a semester-long project, divided in steps to make it possible to follow the project development. This will allow practicing various skills that students need for completing the course. When students’ interests are identified and used for researching/solving topical problems, motivation changes and the dysfunctional ‘sitting in class’ is reduced.

(5) Students systematically discover *incorrect assumptions*, which they have formed about knowledge, one’s own thinking habits, laws of logical thinking, and fundamental content of one’s discipline.

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